

The Dark Romantics

Presentation Overview

The Dark Romantics slide show will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to present. This presentation provides a brief review of the beliefs of the Dark Romantics in contrast and comparison to the beliefs of the Transcendentalists.

You may wish to give students the Student's Notes worksheet to use as a note-taking tool as they view the presentation.

Background Information

The Dark Romantics: Challenge to the Transcendentalists

Both the Transcendentalists and the Dark Romantics drew inspiration from the general stream of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Romanticism, a movement that began in Germany in the late eighteenth century, was a reaction against rationalism, the philosophical view that reason is the best source of knowledge. The primary characteristic of Romantic thought was the valuing of feeling and intuition over reason. Partly in reaction to the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantics embraced imagination and the symbolic beauty of nature as sources of truth unavailable to the rational mind. Romantic writing and art often had elements of the supernatural. Romanticism affected literature and the other arts, remaining strong throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Although equally inspired by Romanticism, the Transcendentalists and the Dark Romantics focused on different aspects of the Romantic sensibility. The Transcendentalists emphasized the human potential for goodness and exalted the natural world as a symbol or reflection of divine beauty. The Dark Romantics, partly in reaction to the optimistic, mystical Transcendentalist view, turned their imagination to the dark side of the human spirit and to the overt or latent evil they saw lurking behind appearances.

Transcendentalism and Dark Romanticism also reflected different aspects of Puritan thought. Dark Romantic writers such as Hawthorne believed that Emerson, the main proponent of Transcendentalism, created a whitewashed vision of the world by embracing only the mystical and idealistic elements of Puritanism. In contrast, Hawthorne brought to the forefront the human potential for sin and evil.

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You may want to introduce the Dark Romantics by having students describe contemporary movies and stories with horror themes. Explain that while these movies and stories have modern-day settings, the concepts behind them have been around for a long time. Point out that Edgar Allan Poe, who wrote in the first half of the nineteenth century, is still considered the greatest American master of the horror story and has provided the inspiration for many contemporary horror tales.

Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions may be used with the slides in The Dark Romantics presentation.

Answers will vary. Sample answers have been provided.

A Dark Romantic View

1. What mood does the passage from Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" create?
[It creates a gloomy, creepy atmosphere and a sense of foreboding.]
2. What do you think the narrator means by "half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible"? What does it mean that his impression of the house was "unrelieved by" this feeling? **(Challenge Question)**
[He means that images of desolation usually give some aesthetic pleasure because they make the viewer have poetic feelings. His view of the house has no poetic value; the house is just dark and gloomy.]

Who Were the Dark Romantics?

1. Do you think that the Dark Romantics' themes are important or worthwhile? Why or why not?
[Yes; it's important to show the dark side of people as well as the light because people are capable of evil as well as good.]

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Who Were the Transcendentalists?

1. What differences do you see so far between the Dark Romantics and the Transcendentalists?

[The Dark Romantics focused on the dark side of human nature, while the Transcendentalists focused on the human potential for goodness. The Transcendentalists were more optimistic about people than the Dark Romantics.]

Differences Between Transcendentalists and Dark Romantics

1. What is the difference between the Transcendentalist and the Dark Romantic view of spirituality?
[The Transcendentalists saw evidence of good and beautiful spiritual truths in the world, while the Dark Romantics saw the dark and frightening aspects of spiritual truths.]
2. One meaning of *idealistic* is “based on a concept of perfection or an idea of how things should be.” How does the Dark Romantic view contrast with an idealistic view?

[The Dark Romantics focused on what they saw to be the unpleasant reality of human nature instead of the beautiful ideal.]

Similarities Between Transcendentalists and Dark Romantics

1. Do you agree with the idea that intuition is a better source of knowledge than logic or reason is? Explain.

[I disagree because logic is more reliable and straightforward than intuition. I think intuition is more closely tied to emotion, which may not always be accurate. Intuition may help you make a quick decision or let you know that something isn't quite right, but most people rely on logic or reason to make important decisions.]

Nathaniel Hawthorne

1. Have you read a short story or novel by Hawthorne? In your opinion, did it express a Dark Romantic viewpoint? Explain.

[I read “The Minister’s Black Veil.” I think it reflects a Dark Romantic viewpoint because it suggests that everyone is hiding a dark nature beneath his or her everyday appearance.]

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Herman Melville

1. In what way do Captain Ahab's doubts about ultimate truth contrast with the Transcendentalist viewpoint? (**Challenge Question**)

[The Transcendentalists believed strongly in an ultimate truth behind everyday reality.]

Edgar Allan Poe

1. What short stories have you read by Poe? Describe the atmosphere that Poe creates in these stories.
[I've read "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." These stories have a creepy atmosphere of horror and impending doom.]

The Dark Romantic Legacy

1. What movies can you think of that take inspiration from Poe's dark themes?
[Horror movies such as *The Haunting* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* probably take inspiration from Poe's horror stories.]
2. What are some examples of contemporary movies or stories that portray a battle between good and evil? Why do you think this theme is so popular?
[Some examples are *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The theme of good versus evil is popular because people want to see good triumph over evil.]

What Have You Learned?

Answers:

1. b. false
2. b. false
3. a. true